

Chester A Arthur Novel

TYPE 15A

712007 085 03282



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2012 with funding from  
Friends of the Lincoln Financial Collection in Indiana

<http://archive.org/details/assassinationofa00fraz>

# The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Chester A. Arthur Novel

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

Chester A. Arthur Novel

EXCERPTS 1864

Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



CHESTER A. ARTHUR



PERSPECTIVE EDITOR

**CAROL  
FENZELL**

## Playing games with history: a startling plot

Chester A. Arthur, who was president of the United States 100 years ago, doesn't stand out in history. "Chester who?" would be the likely response to a question about him, posed to anybody but a scholar immersed in the 1880s.

His career was a curiosity. He was a New York machine politician who was never elected to any office but the vice presidency. He was a Civil War general who never saw any combat. He was a civil servant who was dismissed as administrator of the U.S. Customs office in New York City amid a scandal over flagrant abuses of the patronage system.

No wonder the press reacted with consternation when Arthur rose to the presidency after the assassination of James A. Garfield in 1881. Nasty insinuations were made from the fact that the assassin was an Arthur supporter. But at that point Arthur's life took a turn that remains something of an enigma.

**HIS PRESIDENCY** wasn't half-bad. In fact, in the context of the times, it was pretty good. He supported a civil service reform bill that was passed during his administration. He conducted himself in a manner that won public confidence and esteem. He even engineered a reduction in the postal rate for letters from 3 cents to 2. It was almost as if the president wasn't Chester A. Arthur at all, but someone else.

Novelist William Wiegand thinks possibly he was John Wilkes Booth.

(I'll pause here for a moment while you clean up the coffee you just spilled.)

How could Booth, who assassinated Abraham Lincoln and was himself shot to death in 1865, have become president in



Arthur (left) and Booth: A resemblance?

1881? Wiegand offers his speculations in a novel, *The Chester A. Arthur Conspiracy* (Dial Press, \$16.95).

That's not a title that's likely to put a novel on the best seller list. It fairly radiates dullness. Unfortunately, Wiegand's narrative does little to dispel that image. He unabashedly mixes fiction and fact in a plot that puts too much emphasis on minor characters and not enough on explaining his case. Yet his story line is historically possible — not plausible, but possible.

**SUPPOSE IT** was not Booth, but someone posing as Booth, who was chased down and shot in 1865. Suppose Booth was harbored for several years by the staunchly Confederate Herndon family of Fredericksburg, Va., and became involved in a love affair with Nell Herndon Arthur, who happened to be Chester's wife.

Suppose Chester died unexpectedly in circumstances that allowed Booth to apply makeup quickly and take his place. Suppose several New York political figures were guilty of complicity in the Lincoln assassination and had to keep silent about the change in Chester for fear Booth might talk.

Suppose Booth was enough of an actor to do a convincing impersonation of a man who was taller, stouter and older than he. Suppose Booth sought the presidency so he could clear his name by tracing a section of his own diary that had been confiscated by Lincoln's

secretary of war, Edwin Stanton. Suppose Booth conspired with a man named Guiteau to assassinate Garfield.

That's a lot of supposing, and there are no grounds for belief in any of this. Yet it can't be dismissed as impossible, either. To understand how carefully Wiegand has strung his yarn through the actual events of Arthur's life, one has to read *Gentleman Boss: The Life of Chester Alan Arthur*, by Thomas C. Reeves, published by Alfred Knopf in 1975 and available at the public library in St. Petersburg.

**IN MANY WAYS** Arthur's career is a mystery. He was transformed by the presidency perhaps more than any other person who has held the job. By abandoning not only his cynical past as a patronage dispenser, but also his political cronies, he destroyed any chance to be returned to office. Suffering from Bright's disease, he lived just long enough to serve out his term, dying in 1886 a year after leaving the White House. And just before he died, he had all his papers burned. Nobody knows why.

Wiegand's way of knotting up the loose ends of Arthur's life amounts to nothing more than playing games with history, but it may focus new attention on this forgotten president. A few years ago Millard Fillmore was something of a cult figure, largely because of his sheer obscurity as the 13th president. Maybe we'll be seeing Chester A. Arthur T-shirts next.

